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ABSTRACT

This report presents the response of delegates to the 1983 Vocational Industrial Clubs of America (VICA) National Leadership Conference to the report of the National Commission on Excellence and Education, "A Nation at Risk." Their responses are provided to three issues: content (the Five New Basics), time, and citizen involvement. For each issue, a recommendation quoted from the Commission's report is followed by a comment, a question based on the recommendation, and the delegates' response. These are the questions to which delegates responded: (1) How would your completion of the New Basics better prepare you for occupational training and future employment? (2) How would you be affected if you spent more time in school and do you need more time in school for your occupational training? and (3) What could VICA members at all levels do to respond to the report and how might club activities relate to our theme, "Making US First"? (YLB)

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A Nation At Risk:

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

VICA MEMBERS RESPOND

The Vocational Industrial Clubs of America (VICA) is the national organization for students in trade, industrial, technical and health occupations programs in public high schools, vocational schools, junior colleges and community colleges. VICA's purpose is to complement the student's skill training with development of the whole person. Students learn such personal qualities and attitudes as leadership, good citizenship, self-respect, and high standards of crafts skill and ethics, all of which will make them truly professional in their chosen careers.

VICA was organized in 1965 as a non-profit educational association and represents nearly 300,000 students in 50 state associations, including Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

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INTRODUCTION

In April of this year, the National Commission on Excellence in Education sent an intentional shock wave through the education community and, indeed, through the entire country. The cause was the publication of the Commission's report card on the condition of education in America entitled **A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform**. Its findings are considered harsh by some, but its statement is to the point:

> Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds American prosperity, security, and civility. . .the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and as a people.

This assessment comes from experts in education, gathered on the Reagan Administration's Commission. Their response comes in a time of federal government cut-backs, low productivity rates, and decreasing incomes. It follows a decade of extraordinary demands on education. These demands include meeting social needs in the areas of civil rights, minority rights, rights of the handicapped and the limited English-speaking, as well as the urgency to respond to the challenges of high technology and new and emerging occupations.

Under these circumstances, quality *has* declined. The Commission had no trouble finding supporting evidence. Commission members reviewed test scores and interviewed scholars, administrators, teachers, students, parents, business and government leaders. The result of their research brought them to this conclusion: education is not making the grade in its most important function — preparing the future generation of America's citizens for life, for a career, financial security, and personal fulfillment.

The brunt of the criticism by the Commission fell on a lack of grounding in the 3 R's, the basics. It would be difficult to quarrel with such criticism. However, many people in education fear that the ironic response to the report — in these budget-tight times — may be to throw more money toward the basics by removing support from programs which *are* working. Among those programs is what has been called "people's education," vocational education.

Vocational educators, too, have complained loudly and often that their students do not have the "basics." Too many students arrive in their classrooms ill-prepared to master the fundamental skills and theory essential to occupational training. These vocational instructors, and their industry advisory committees, have long observed that students throughout the public school syustem can't read, can't write, can't add, and are not prepared to meet the demands of training or the challenges of work.

In this light, students, teachers, and industry representatives who are members of the Vocational Industrial Clubs of America (VICA) were encouraged by President Ronald Reagan's remarks during VICA's National Leadership Conference in June. He told his audience that "vocational classrooms are just as important as any other." He also stated that:

> If America's industries hope to compete and win in world markets, they must have at their hearts a broadly educated workforce trained in the skills of the 21st Century. American industry as well as American educational institutions should take note of the VICA experience.

The "VICA experience" of which the President spoke ensures that vocational program graduates will have not only excellent occupational skills, but professional attitudes as well. The VICA program is recognized by the Department of Education as an integral part of the training curriculum for trade, industrial, technical and health occupations students enrolled in public secondary and postsecondary vocational programs. VICA's concentration is on leadership training concurrent with occupational training; the ultimate result is a positively motivated and occupationally skilled worker. The VICA experience, in other words, develops workers for the 21st Century

because it forms the basis for life-long learning. It offers opportunities for achievement and recognition of those marketable skills which industry seeks in an employee: essential human relations skills, appropriate attitudes toward work, and the ability to cope with changing jobs in a mobile society.

As members of an association committed to educational excellence, VICA members are determined to live up to industry's expectations. They have no higher stake than in the quality of the training they receive and they look forward to the opportunities of the future. Moreover, they are aware of their responsibility to their own education and concerned about the quality of education which will be provided to those students who follow them.

This is their response to the report **A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform**.

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Background

With the publication of its report, the Commission on Excellence in Education hoped that it would set in motion a national dialogue on the quality of education in America. Specifically, Commission members stated that "help should come from the students themselves."

VICA members accepted the challenge.

During the 1983 VICA National leadership Conference in Louisville, Kentucky, 2,500 student delegates from 48 states and two territories, representing 275,000 VICA members nationwide, participated in Task Force discussions to address issues related to the Commission's report. Also involved in the dialogue were more than 1,500 instructors who served as advisors to the students.

To carry out the work of the Task Force, 288 voting delegates were given copies of a brochure printed by the Commission on Excellence in Education summarizing its findings and recommendations as well as a task force workbook prepared by National VICA. The workbook gave background information on the activities of the Commission, and then asked for essay responses to questions based on recommendations quoted from the Commission's report and amplified by quotes from a different source.

The delegates were asked to review the brochure and the task force workbook and then talk to both students and teachers in their state delegations about the issues. From the resulting discussions within their delegations, they were to summarize the thinking of their state representatives and then return, after three days, to meet officially in Task Force groups to share their findings. The final Task Force meetings were chaired by VICA alumni.

Following is the VICA delegates' response to the Commission's report. As can be expected in any survey, there are some differences of opinion in delegate responses. However, *every* delegate report evidenced these commonly held beliefs:

First, VICA members *value* their vocational training. They consider the time they spend learning as crucial, and any shortcomings in their education will have a direct and lasting impact on their futures. They fully support instruction in the basics, but not at the expense of their vocational training.

Second, they believe they will play a key role, as *leaders*, in re-establishing America's leadership in the industrial world.

Issue: Content

"**We recommend** that State and local high school graduation requirements be strengthened and that, at a minimum, all students seeking a diploma be required to lay the foundations in the Five New Basics by taking the following curriculum during their 4 years of high school: (a) 4 years of English; (b) 3 years of mathematics; (c) 3 years of science; (d) 3 years of social studies; and (e) one-half year of computer science."

Commission On Excellence

Comment: In a meeting in April with state directors of vocational education, Secretary Terrel H. Bell stated that more emphasis on basic skills could be good for vocational education because of "the increasing demand and complexity of vocational-technical courses."

Question: How would your completion of the New Basics better prepare you for your occupational training and future employment?

RESPONSE: The issue of new and expanded requirements drew the most interest from the delegates. The overwhelming majority expressed a belief that completion of the New Basics would ensure a "well-rounded" education, a strong foundation upon which they could build their knowledge and skills. Many were concerned that they needed the New Basics, not only to excel in their vocational programs,

"We lose time from our occupational training when our vocational instructors have to spend time teaching the basics."

Student Delegate

but also to succeed in continuing education programs, whether at the university level, in seminars and workshops, or at night school.

Virtually all of the delegates, however, voiced sentiment that the New Basics should *not* be required at the expense of their vocational training. Further, they felt that some of the requirements should be completed in the early high school years, *before* they began study in their vocational programs. Secondary school students were particularly concerned that they be in a position to earn a living wage when they graduate from high school.

Specifically, most delegates responded that the proposed English and mathematics requirements would directly relate to their success in their chosen occupations. Almost every respondent enthusiastically supported the computer science requirement, stating that they would advocate even more time in computer related training. Certainly these students were aware that "computers are the wave of the future, and the future begins today."

Less widespread support was evidenced for the recommended social studies and science courses. It appeared that if students saw no direct and immediate application for the course, they "didn't need it" at all. However, those students enrolled in technical or health occupations programs were vocal in their support for science education. Clearly, they saw a direct relationship to their occupational goals.

The postsecondary delegates added a requirement of their own. These students stated that a "communications and human relations" component was essential to their success on the job.

Issue: Time

"**We recommend** that significantly more time be devoted to learning the New Basics. This will require more effective use of the existing school day, a longer school day, or a lengthened school year."

Comment: In responding to the report, Gene Bottoms, Executive Director of the American Vocational Association (AVA) stated, "I think we have lowered our expectations. I don't think there's any doubt about it; we have to expand time (in school) if students are going to acquire all we expect them to know."

Question: How would you be affected if you spent more time in school? Do you need more time in school for your occupational training?

RESPONSE: The two-part question on increased time in school drew mixed responses from the VICA delegates. While two-thirds of the secondary school students disagreed with the recommendation to devote more time in school to learning the New Basics, fully one-half of the postsecondary task force members supported the recommendation. Their opinions were based, of course, on the fact that they had completed high school and had the benefit of hindsight secondary students could not have.

The most frequently expressed comment was that the *quality* of time spent in learning was much more important than the *quantity* of time passed in classes. Delegates blamed poor use of time on both students and teachers: teachers who do not provide instruction, and students with poor attitudes.

While many of the VICA delegates were not opposed to spending more time in school learning the basics, they did voice concern that students who already find school "boring" might be discouraged and inclined to drop out of school. Some spoke of possible student "burn out," but one delegate countered saying, "students who would complain about being 'burned out' after 6 to 7 hours of school are looking for an excuse and are not mentally prepared for the world of work."

There were also mixed reactions to the idea of increased time in vocational training. Discussion centered both on the total length of the occupational training and on the length of time spent each day in vocational preparation.

The delegates stated that more training time in their vocational programs would allow students to absorb a wider range of more difficult occupational material so that they would be better qualified to enter the job market. "It would be worthwhile to spend the additional time now since we are training for the rest of our lives."

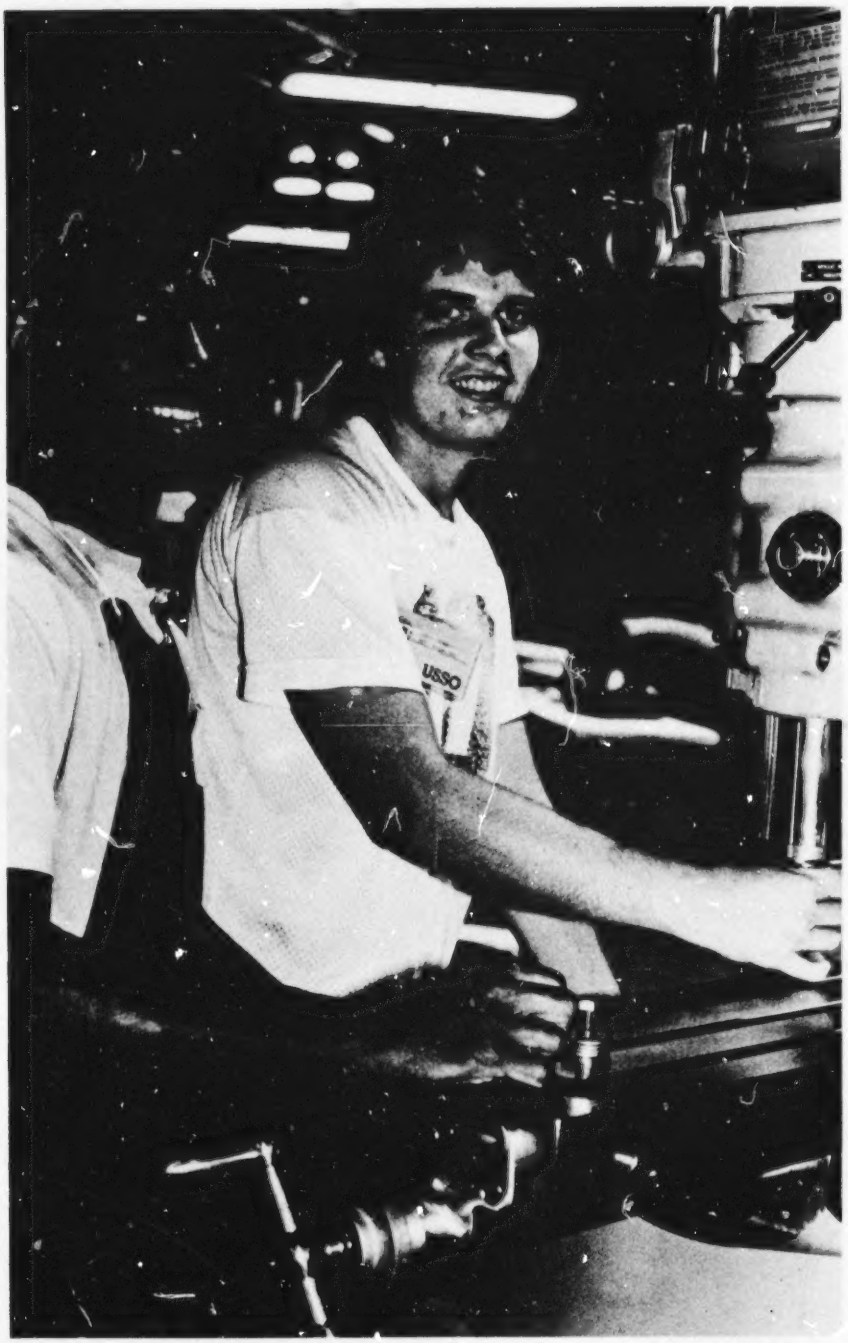
Not surprisingly, students complained that currently not enough time is allocated each day for their occupational programs. "We don't

"The amount of time itself doesn't really matter. More doesn't necessarily mean better. What *is* necessary is the complete utilization of the time we have."

Student Delegate

"If both students and teachers took their work seriously, the learning of both the New Basics and occupational skills would be accomplished."

Student Delegate



have time to complete all our assigned tasks. It seems as though we just get involved and suddenly it's time to clean up and start all over tomorrow."

In another vein, students enrolled in cooperative education programs worried about loss of time and training on their jobs if the school day was lengthened. But those whose training program did not include cooperative education stated that they wished they *had* more time in vocational training so they could add a work experience component to their occupational preparation.

In addition to sharing their concerns about time in school, delegates also provided constructive solutions to the problem of limited time in vocational training. Their recommendations included: completing the New Basics early in the high school years to permit more concentrated study in occupational programs; beginning vocational training at an earlier age; designing programs to include more full days and fewer half days; and increasing opportunities to add a "capstone" work experience program.

"Technology is becoming more complex. If we had additional time our instructors would be able to increase the value of the occupational training by updating and upgrading the curriculum."

Student Delegate

Issue: Citizen Involvement

"We recommend that citizens across the Nation hold educators and elected officials responsible for providing the leadership necessary to achieve these reforms, and that citizens provide the fiscal support and stability required to bring about the reforms we propose."

Comment: The Commission calls upon educators, public officials, parents and students to assist in bringing about the educational reform proposed in this report and to use the report as a beginning to discuss and debate ways to achieve excellence in education.

Question: What could VICA members, at the local, state and national levels, do to respond to the report? Also, how might club activities relate to our theme "Making US First"?

RESPONSE: In answering the call for involvement by citizens across the nation to ensure quality in education, VICA delegates in Task Force meetings proposed specific recommendations for members who would join them in responding to the challenge of the Commission on Excellence in Education. It is clear that the delegates are willing and able to assist in bringing about the educational reforms recommended in the report. These delegates have no place in their plans to be members of a "silent majority." Their ideas were educational, exciting, and (best of all) inexpensive.

On the whole, the delegates hoped to see a continued focus on excellence in education at the national level of VICA. They suggested that national VICA publications highlight outstanding and unusual activities that address the report of the Commission and that VICA also recognize these efforts at the National leadership Conference in 1984.

To carry the focus to the state level, delegates recommended that statewide projects be developed, that state and regional forums be sponsored by VICA, and that VICA members meet with state legislators to discuss the implications of the report and plan creative ways to implement the Commission's recommendations.

Special interest centered on activities at the local club level, because it is here that *all* members can become involved. In general, delegates believed that every club should initiate a planned program of activities in the community to include all segments of the population mentioned in the report.

The product of the Task Force meetings is a proposed "Action Agenda for Local Clubs" which is outlined below:

- Set up an ad hoc committee to formulate a comprehensive plan of action for the year to inform the community about the Commission's report. This committee should comprise students,

parents, teachers, administrators, alumni and industry representatives.

- Focus the plans of VICA standing committees on response to the report.
- Use the theme of "Making US First/Excellence in Education" for VICA activities.
- Create a public awareness campaign and distribute a newsletter or pamphlet to summarize the findings and recommendations of the report. Follow up by conducting a community survey.
- Request time and space from local media to report periodically on VICA activities related to the report. Such reports would cover the issues raised by the Commission's report, special issues that affect the community, survey results, interviews with community members, and suggestions for program improvement.
- Organize and sponsor activities to involve the citizens such as town meetings, panel discussions, or debates to address the issues of quality education.
- Meet with the decision-makers in the community including school boards, teacher's groups, parent associations, business and service organizations and local government representatives. Ask to attend meetings and talk about what's *right* with the educational system as well as what improvements need to be made.
- Conduct a Goodwill Tour to both education and industry focusing of excellence in education, especially the quality training VICA members receive in vocational programs.
- Prepare a "Report Card" on the state of the schools highlighting both strengths and weaknesses.
- Hold an open house to demonstrate "excellence in action in vocational programs.
- Visit elementary, intermediate and junior high schools to talk to younger students about the need to get a good education.
- Most important, as an individual make a "personal commitment to excellence in education." VICA members are encouraged to pledge to improve in one aspect of learning or to design a personal plan to tutor a student or adult, or provide needed training assistance.

"We have a chance to be the first in our communities to show our concern over the report and to develop activities to respond positively."

Student Delegate

Conclusion

America's workers have always been the link between dreams and reality. Their skills and their minds built America, and VICA members are committed to contributing their talents and abilities to the continued growth and strength of our country.

While our members are serious about their training and their goals for the future, experience has taught them that often the general public perceives them in a different light. They hear about the poor image of the vocational student and feel that they are sometimes treated as second class citizens. They are at the same time indignant and hurt. But more, they are determined to change their image.

Despite (and because of) this, the delegates welcomed the opportunity to participate on VICA's Task Forces on Excellence in Education. As members of an association, as citizens in a democracy, and as a part of the educational system itself, they hope to carry home the drive for quality education. It is their hope, their dream if you will, that by demonstrating "leadership in action" they will be recognized as tomorrow's leaders. In the words of Kevin Yodjas, 1983 VICA President for the Postsecondary Division:

> "Your leadership in VICA offers you a unique opportunity to demonstrate that you can be part of the solution, not simply part of the problem."

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